

LITTLE RED MITTENS

By JACK KARNEY

Author of "Sixty Seconds," etc.

GOFF is dirty, my brother Mickey says for the hundredth time. He's got ten thumbs and he'll try to rip your eyes out with all ten. Give him half a chance and he'll blind you.

Mickey should know. Mickey tangled with Goff back in '41 in a semi-wind-up in the Garden. Goff wasn't Champ then but he knew his stuff. He knew every dirty trick in the game.



Yeah, Some Mittens, Loaded

With Dynamite, All For You!

Watch your step, Mickey says, as we go down the long aisle, up the steps, through the ropes. The crowd sings and I wave my hands and give them a smile. Helen Dorson, blonde, beautiful Helen, throws me a kiss from ringside and I laugh and wink and tell her in dummy language I'm going to take Goff's crown away from him. I dance around in my corner and I grin all over the place.

But I'm scared, scared as a prelim kid. Maybe not as scared as in North Africa when you had to fight Nazis, heat and sand. Or at Anzio when the sky burst into a million hot pieces of lead and came down all around you and the beach shrank smaller and smaller. Or in that mine field outside Rome. . . .

But I'll get over it, I know. Soon as the bell rings that tightening in my throat will disappear, my insides will stop banging against my ribs. It always has before. . . .

Watch his head, Joe, or he'll smash your face to pieces, Mickey says. You'll beat him only don't let him steal the fight. What he doesn't say is, Beat him for me, Joe. Tear his head off and hand it to him and tell him it's for Mickey.

I hear the bell and for a second it means nothing to me. Then Mickey slaps my back, swings out the stool and I go out to mix with Goff. At last my chance has come. For a long time I've wanted to be Champ and now it's up to me and my little red gloves. Joe Reilly, Champ. . . .

Goff is like a dust storm that comes up

to smother you, rips into your body, blinds you. Only the punches hurt more. I grab and hold and he whispers things in my ear, crazy things, like what he's going to do to my pretty face. We break but he's still talking. He tells me how he'll play with me for a while, how he'll give me the same dose of leather poisoning he gave my brother Mickey. I don't answer him. Let him talk. That's what Mickey said. Let the monkey talk his brains out. I get up on my toes and move around fast. Now I can get away from his long left, his short punches inside. But I can't get away from his brass-knuckled tongue. . . .

IT WAS back in December '41, the Friday before Pearl Harbor when Mickey and Nick Goff had their fight. Mickey was doing all right, outpointing Goff, stabbing him silly with a sharp left hand, making him grab and hold with jolting, slashing punches under the heart. Goff went to work. First he stuck his thumb in Mickey's right eye, then ground the heel of his glove into a small cut over Mickey's left eye. He caught Mickey coming off the ropes and hooked his left hand into the groin. The referee warned Goff so he hit Mickey twice more below the belt. What the hell, he'd forfeited the round anyway on a foul, so what could he lose?

Mickey lost his head. Goff talked to him and Mickey was back on the cobblestoned streets, science forgotten. He became right hand crazy trying to beat Goff's face into the dirty canvas. Goff ripped him to pieces. In the seventh round he closed Mickey's left eye tight as a drum. Then he worked on the right eye, opening a gash just above the eyebrow. The referee stopped the fight; he had no choice. Mickey hollered and tried to get at Goff again and his handlers had to pull him out of the ring.

In the dressing room we couldn't hold him down, his manager, Patsy Corrody, his handler Whitey Smith and me. Mickey hollered for us to let him go to Goff's dressing room where they could finish the fight with bare fists. Even when Mickey's girl, Helen Dorson, came in and pleaded with him to forget Goff—the fight was over and done with—Mickey wouldn't calm down. All Mickey could understand was that Nick

Goff had played him dirt and he had to retaliate. Goff would have done the same if it were the other way around.

You see, Goff wasn't a stranger to us. Mickey, Goff and I had been brought up in the same neighborhood, Jackson Street, on the lower east side. Ever since I can remember, Goff and Mickey had been enemies. It was in their blood, disliking each other, one trying to outdo the other. There was the time Goff did a swan dive off the Lehigh pier three stories high. Mickey, not to be outdone, followed suit, only he wasn't a good diver and wound up with a broken leg. Once Goff broke two knuckles on his right hand when he tried to duplicate Mickey's feat of punching a hole in an orange crate. Kid stuff? To them it wasn't.

They averaged one fight a week under the lights on Jackson Street and when Goff moved to Cherry Street and formed his own gang the rivalry grew more intense. There was many a broken head before Election Day when one gang tried to steal the stored-up bonfire wood from the other. Provocation wasn't necessary for the Goff gang to invade peaceful Jackson Street to look for a Reilly gang member to haze. Nor did we spend all our time playing.

The boys got older and the gang fights stopped but the rivalry between Mickey and Goff remained. The only reason Goff became a professional fighter was because Mickey had won four bouts in a row and was outshining Goff in popularity. Somehow a professional fighter always did command a certain respect and adoration in our neighborhood. Don't ask me why. That's the way it was.

It was inevitable that sooner or later Mickey and Goff would meet inside ropes. They were of the same weight, both were winning consistently, and, what's more important to a matchmaker, the match would be a natural. Mickey Reilly, East Side, versus Nick Goff, East Side for the Championship of the East Side. . . .

THE doctor came into the dressing room, took one look at Mickey's face and ordered him to stretch out on the table. Mickey paid him no attention. Face caked with sweat and blood, Mickey kept hollering:

"Patsy, get a re-match with Goff. Patsy,

I'll take him next time or give up boxing. I can do it. Patsy. . . ."

Patsy Corrody sat on the bench, his head almost in his lap. "Forget it," he said, not looking up.

The doctor said to Mickey, "If that eye doesn't get attention, you'll lose it."

"Patsy," Mickey stood over him, the bandages still on his hands, "What the hell kind of manager are you anyway! Go out and get me Goff again. I'll murder him next time."

"Mickey, please." Helen was at his side, wet blue eyes trying to catch his.

"Patsy, damn it!" Mickey cried.

PATSY looked up. "He's too good for you, Mickey. You know why? Because he keeps his head on his shoulder; you got yours in a sewer."

Mickey's whole body shook with anger. "I can take him. I can lick that monkey."

Patsy said quietly, "He's too good for you. Geez, kid, you lose your head too fast. Okay, so he fouled you. We all saw that. He's dirty, slimy as hell. But you would've beat him. You could've done it. But no, you have to play right into his hands. You blow your topper and give him the fight."

"Next time it'll be different."

"It won't. You know it, I know it, anybody who saw you tonight knows it too."

"One more fight, Patsy, just one more," he pleaded.

Helen said, "Maybe it's better that you give up this boxing."

He turned on her. "What the devil you talking about?"

Patsy said, "She's got something there. Kid, you'll never be Champ. You'll always be a mattress for some guy."

Mickey said, "Get me Goff, that's all I ask."

Helen said, "Don't, Mickey. Listen to me."

He said, "Helen, for God's sake, butt out of this. It's none of your business." His voice was sharp and loud and ringing all over the place. He was mad and the words that came out of his mouth weren't his. He loved Helen, everybody knew that.

"This is my business, Mickey," she said. Maybe she shouldn't have argued with him. Tomorrow, he'd cool down, then she could

talk her heart out and he'd listen. Not now. . . .

Mickey cried, "Then I'm making it none of your business. Now will you leave me alone!"

Her lips tightened white and there were two red spots on her cheeks. She turned and went out. For a second I thought he'd call her back but he didn't.

"Patsy," he said, "I'll fight Goff for peanuts . . . for charity . . . winner take all . . . anything. . . ."

I went after Helen and caught her on the corner, just as she was going down the Independent Subway. On the train, while some drunks in the corner were serenading a movie poster of Greer Garson, I tried to explain to Helen that Mickey hadn't really meant what he said.

"You know Mickey," I said, "hollering one minute, the nicest guy in the world the next minute."

She looked around at me and her blue eyes flashed. "I've had enough of his temper. Don't look so grieved, Joe. It's for the best, believe me."

We stood in the hallway of her house and we talked a few minutes. Then I said something about Mickey and her and the next thing I knew she was bawling like a kid. I put my arms around her and she cried on my coat and I wished I had Mickey here so I could tell him what I thought of him. Hurting a sweet kid like Helen. . . . I held her closer and by the time she stopped crying I decided that I loved her.

GOFF comes charging and we slug it out in the center of the ring, which sends the crowd into a minor case of hysterics. I splash my left in Goff's face and he stops talking for a full second. Then he starts in again, something about my laces being untied, and my trunks being too high up. Crazy things that became annoying after a while. I drop a left into his face, and a right, and he's got rubber in his legs. I got him now. He's reeling. The crown is mine, in my pocket. The Championship belt is hanging over the fireplace—only he's still the Champ and he's learned a lot of tricks and when he goes on the defense I just can't get his bobbing head in my sights. He comes too close and I hook my left into his face, and the jar runs up my arm to my

shoulder. I try it again and he slides under, grabs and holds, his head flat against my chest. I remember Mickey's warning, I know what's coming, yet I'm too slow. Goff's head comes up with a sickening thud. I go back on my heels, funny noises running in and out of my ears, the lights overhead shooting dirty gold sparks. The bell rings a million miles away and I stand there, the blood running into my left eye from where Goff's marble head connected. . . .

MICKEY didn't come home that night, nor the next morning. Around three in the afternoon, Patsy Corrody came looking for me. Patsy had a troubled look in his black eyes and there was pallor around his thick lips.

"After the doctor got him all patched up that crazy brother of yours tangled with Goff in a clubroom brawl. Goff's friends beat the daylight out of Mickey."

I got hot and cold and I wanted Goff in front of me so I could kick his teeth out. I wanted to part his hair with a chair.

Patsy said, "What good would it do?"

"I'll get the fellers."

"And go back to the old gang fights? No, Joe. It's Mickey's fault. He went looking for trouble and he got it."

I said, "What now? What'll Mickey do when he gets on his feet? Sure as hell, he'll go looking for Goff again. He won't rest until he squares the score. I know Mickey."

Patsy frowned and played with his chin. "Crazy kid. A fight's a fight. What the devil is the sense in blowing your top? So he meets Goff in the street and suppose Mickey does beat hell out of him. What does it get him? And you know what? In a hundred years Mickey couldn't take Goff. Why? Goff's got Mickey's number. Anytime he wants, Goff can talk Mickey out of the fight."

I said, "Goff is dirty, just lousy dirty."

Patsy shrugged. "Some guys fight like that. But they can be beat by a smart boy who doesn't lose his head. Mickey isn't in that class. He's a good kid but . . . aw, hell. I suppose I'll have to get him that fight. . . ."

Mickey and Nick Goff were matched for an early March fight. Mickey, impatient, hollered plenty.

"Why March? Whatsamatter with January?"

Patsy explained that Mickey's face needed time to heal and besides, it was the first Friday night available in the Garden. Mickey griped plenty but he had to take it and like it.

Then Uncle Sam stepped in. Mickey's number was up, Mickey's and mine, and the fight was off. We had a date at Grand Central Palace, the Induction Center. We passed with flying colors and after that talking to Mickey was at your own risk. Couldn't they wait until he'd had his fight with Goff?

"After that I wouldn't give a damn. Just that fight. . . . Maybe if I give every dime of my purse to the Red Cross, maybe they'll let me fight, huh, Patsy?"

"I'll see what I can do," Patsy said.

But it was no use. Mickey was in the Army and nothing could be done about it.

I said, "The war won't last forever, Mickey. We'll knock those monkeys kicking, then you'll come back and take Goff."

"How long will that be?" he cried.

I said, "How the hell should I know?"

Throughout basic training Mickey kept at his boxing. In the evening after a day of tough, back-breaking maneuvers, he would put on the twelve-ounce gloves and inveigle a couple of the boys to go a round or two with him.

"Mickey," I said, "you ain't had enough exercise for one day?"

"Gotta keep my eye sharp, and my timing, don't I?"

Soon Mickey had no customers to box with. I didn't blame the fellers. Hell, Mickey was too rough, tearing out of his corner soon's I gave the signal to start the round, pounding, tearing, slashing away. You'd think he had Goff for a sparring partner. The fellers had too hard a time during the day to appreciate Mickey's kind of relaxation.

One day Mickey said, "Joe, you've been around the gym; you've put on the gloves with the boys."

I looked away. "That was different. Those boys were amateurs, not crazy professionals who try to tear you to pieces."

"I'll take it easy. Honest. You want me to kick hell out of Goff, don't you?"

I could not beat that kind of argument.

Sure I wanted him to beat Goff. I could still remember the beatings the big gorilla gave me. Later, when Mickey would hear about it, he'd come swinging but that didn't heal my sore spots. I remember how I used to go home and at night when everyone was asleep I'd pray that I'd grow big enough and strong enough to slug Nick Goff and make him like it. . . .

"Mickey," I said, "I'll put on the gloves with you on one condition. You teach me the ropes. When I make a mistake you stop sparring, tell me what's wrong. Okay?"

He looked at me sidewise. "You still want to grow up to be Champ? When you were a kid you used to talk about—"

"I was a kid," I said quickly, "and I was just talking. Hell, Mickey, I'm all grown up. I'm nineteen."

He laughed and mussed up my hair. "Okay, Joe. You want to learn to fight? Mickey'll teach you. Maybe someday you'll come along and pin your brother's ears back. Who knows?"

For four months, five times a week, Mickey and I went through the paces. First it took one round for the wind in my lungs to tighten into a hard ball; then two; then three and finally it took four fast rounds to make me grunt and wheeze.

IN THE summer of '42 we got on a boat for a free ride across the ocean to North Ireland where we pitched camp on as sorry a piece of land as I'll ever see. We'd hardly got settled when Mickey dug out the new pair of gloves he'd bought before leaving the States. So we went at it and I took my quota of punches, doling out some just to break the monotony. In the last few workouts I'd been sliding away from a lot of punches I usually blocked with my chin. Also, Mickey's head hadn't been quite so illusive.

When we'd left New York, Helen Dorson had come to the station to say good-bye and wish us luck and would we drop her a line? Of course, I would. She didn't have to ask me. I loved her, didn't I? I didn't tell her that but when I kissed her I put everything I had in it.

She didn't kiss Mickey though I could see he wanted her to. It was just one of those things. They stood there, one looking at the other, saying things that didn't make

much sense. Then she held out her hand to say good-bye and her face was set tight and so was Mickey's.

"Good-bye," Mickey said, then he turned and she watched him go until his broad back was swallowed by the crowd.

I had written quite often since that day. As for Mickey, he'd dropped her a line once in a while. It was funny sometimes watching Mickey, his forehead puckered, a pencil stuck in his mouth, trying to figure out what to say. Suddenly he'd get an idea, write a while, stop, then crumple up the paper and look for a fresh sheet.

It was in North Ireland when he stopped writing to Helen. Because of me. Four of us were sitting in the barracks. A group in the corner were busy rolling dice. Mickey had gone into town with a couple of the boys. We four just lay around and talked. Sooner or later we got around to girls. We always did. Thompson told about his girl back in Chicago, then Goldie Goldberg opened up his heart about his tomato in San Francisco. Miller shot breeze for a solid twenty minutes; he had a girl in every city in Texas. Now it was my turn. I told them about the cute Irish colleen in the village whom I'd met and already dated twice. While I spoke my piece Mickey came in and sat down on one of the bunks.

Goldberg said, "Reilly, that ain't the girl you write all them letters to."

I studied my fingernails. "No."

Thompson said, "You got a girl back in the States, Reilly?"

I hesitated and Mickey piped up. "Go on, Joe, tell 'em. Sure Joe's got a girl, lots of 'em. Every town we been in Joe got a girl. Why not? Good looking guy like him. Only this girl in New York, she's different, huh, Joe?"

I sucked air. Something had been bothering Mickey for the last few days.

Mickey stood up. "Her name is Helen Dorson. She's like a cool breeze on a hot day; you want her around you all the time." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Pretty Helen with hair full of melted gold, eyes bluer than the bluest sky, a skin only an angel could have. And when you see her coming up the street. . . ." He stopped short, looked around him as if he were seeing the fellers for the first time. He went out and for a few seconds all you

could hear was the dice hitting up against the wall.

I went after Mickey and caught up to him on the road leading to town. He turned to see who it was and kept walking.

"Didn't mean to beat my gums like that, Joe," he said. "Guess you writing them letters. . . ."

I said, "That's all right, Mickey. I didn't want to tell you about me and Helen, not just yet."

He stopped walking. "You and Helen?"

"I love her, Mickey."

His grin was stiff. "You loved every girl you met in every town in Georgia, England and Ireland."

I said indignantly, "That ain't the same as loving the girl you're going to marry."

"You're going to marry . . .!" his eyes caught the moonlight and they were big and shiny—"Helen, she loves you?"

I thought of the night of the fight when in the shadows of her doorway she cried on my overcoat . . . and the day we left New York, when she kissed me. . . .

"Sure she loves me," I said. "What else? . . ."

For the next two nights Mickey and I did no boxing. He couldn't. Not after downing that quart of Irish whiskey.

ROUND after round Goff pecks away at the tape over my left eye. I raise my left shoulder and hide behind it but in close Goff catches the eye again and again. The tape falls away and the claret comes down. Now Goff is all around me, moving to my left, to my blind spot. Suddenly I'm down on hands and knees and there's a roar in my head and the red spots begin to dot the stained canvas. I count one spot, two, three, four. . . . Somebody is counting with me. I look around and the referee's big finger comes down in short, choppy motions. He says, seven, eight. . . . I push myself up at nine. Some guy in purple tights, with little red mittens on his hands comes charging, hits me once, twice. I grab and hold and he whispers dirty names in my ear. I lash out. I want to beat his brains out. I want to knock that leer off his face. Nobody is going to call me names. . . . The canvas comes up with a rush that knocks the wind out of me. I'm sweating it out at Anzio and I'm eating sand and I'm

praying that I'll be strong enough to push myself up and advance. I've got to get up. Got to keep moving forward. . . . Then that same guy in purple trunks comes after me. But he stops short and trots to a corner and my brother Mickey is at my side telling me the round is over. . .

ONE DAY after our outfit left Rome Mickey lost his fight with Nick Goff. Twelve of us were moving up a dirt road looking for stray Krauts. We were to meet the main outfit three miles due east. It was rugged country, gray rolling hills to either side of us touching the blue sky in the distance. A sniper hidden behind some rock to our right began to pick us off like clay pigeons. Thompson got a slug through his shoulder, then Goldie fell forward, both hands clutching his belly.

I went after the Kraut. Our second-Louie hollered something after me. I kept moving, concentrating on the sniper, whom I couldn't see, he was so expertly camouflaged. The Louie hollered again. He was telling me something about land mines. The next step I took, I found out all about them. Suddenly the earth broke into a million pieces and I left the ground with no magic carpet to hold me up. I landed on my back with a jar that sent the breath whistling through my teeth. My thigh burned and there was a terrible, sickening pain on my right side just above the hip. I looked down. My side was a red, gaping hole.

I remember Mickey's shrill voice calling me. I remember the Louie's order for Mickey to come back. And Mickey's answer, telling the Louie where he could go. I raised my head. Mickey was a hundred yards away and coming fast. Then there was an explosion and the last thought in my mind before I lost consciousness was, "Hell, Mickey should've listened to the Louie."

Mickey and I were sent to a hospital fourteen miles outside of London and in a couple months a big transport came and took sixty of us back to the States. Mickey was sent to a Massachusetts hospital while I went to the land of pretty girls, sunshine and oranges, Florida. Just before Thanksgiving '44 I got my medical discharge. I hadn't done so badly. Except for a chunk

bitten out of my right side and a pair of punctured eardrums, I was good as new.

My first stop was to see Mickey. I stood in the ward doorway and watched a nurse helping Mickey around, talking to him in a soft, almost-pleading voice, trying to get him to walk without looking down at the steel brace on his right leg. Mickey, gripping loud, told her to take him back to bed, when he was good and ready he'd walk.

I don't know how long I stood there but suddenly I needed air. I sat on a bench under an apple tree for a long while before I returned to Mickey, flat on his back in bed. He gave me a big hello and introduced me to the guys around him. We talked for a while.

Finally I said, "Well, Mickey, what's gonna be?"

He knew what I meant. His grin was forced. "Soon's I get out of this Army, Patsy Corrody will fix me up with a match with Goff. He's Champ now, the big gorilla, and maybe I'll have to have a couple tune-ups before the Commission will okay the fight."

"Let's stop kidding, Mickey," I said.

The grin was gone and his face looked a pasty yellow against the white of the pillow. There was hopeless discouragement in his eyes.

"Looks like I'll never get back at Goff," he said in a whisper.

I said, "You can't forget Goff, can you, Mickey? Hell, it's three years since he beat you."

He said, "You don't understand."

"Maybe not," I said. "Maybe I wasn't around the day you dived off Lehigh pier and broke your leg. Or the time you almost fell off the roof trying to show Goff you weren't scared of walking along the edge. And the time—"

"Okay, okay, so it's kid stuff. . . ." He looked up at the ceiling for a while, then he said, "I'd give my good leg to get another crack at Goff."

I said, "That's crazy talk." Then I got an idea. It wasn't so sudden. It must have been in me, a mere dot in back of my head, growing and growing. . . .

"Mickey," I said, "how many fights would I need before I could get a match with Goff?"

His head came around in a slow, stiff

turn. He sat up in bed, his eyes never leaving my face. The smile came slowly, blossomed into a man-sized grin.

"Why not?" he said softly, then so loud, a sudden hush fell over the ward, "Why the hell not?"

He hollered for the nurse to come give him his walking lessons. Mickey was now good and ready.

IN THE tenth round my legs have lost their spring; I roll with the punch but a split second too late. I'm tired and gulp air. Between rounds the boys worked hard over me; Mickey patched my eye while my other two handlers worked with the sponge, wiping away the dirt and sweat and blood, massaging life into my muscles. Then Goff landed once and all their work was shot to hell. Nine full rounds of eating soggy leather has added up. I begin to lower my arms a little and in the clinches, when the referee slaps my shoulder for the break, I hold on for another precious second. Goff is still talking, only he's lost his sting. He begins to curse and spit and stomp like an animal. Now it's my turn. I taunt him, laugh in his face. Mad, he throws a barrage of leather. I catch the punches on my arms and shoulders. Goff hooks his left and it's so low I feel it through my cup. The referee shakes his finger in Goff's wet, shiny face and the crowd boos. So Goff hooks me low again only this time I catch it on my thigh. We trade punches and fall into a clinch. Goff presses the heel of his glove against my bad eye, pushes me away from him, at the same time twisting his wrist sharply. The pain brings a sob up from my throat. The blood begins to flow again. I never see the punch. I sink to the canvas. At eight I'm up only to go down again from a hand grenade exploding on my chin. It feels good, stretched out on the floor. For all I care the referee can count a hundred. I hear six, seven, eight, then the bell and I don't know whether I'm glad or not.

MY FIRST fight was in New Haven, Conn. where I knocked out Ken Firpo in the third round of a scheduled four-rounder. We moved west. Mickey put his heart and soul into his new job, teaching me the art of mayhem. He watched over

me so much I kicked the traces in Detroit, refusing to break a date with a redhead I'd picked up. I paid for that when I dropped a six-round decision to Bill Boyd. After that I listened to Mickey. I had to if I ever expected to be Champ, and the more I boxed the more I wanted that Championship belt.

After knocking out Bill Boyd in a return match, we moved on to St. Louis where I won three fights. In Denver we stayed for two fights then went to Los Angeles. Four months later, after I beat Johnny Revel, the State Champ, in a good ten-round fight, we began our slow trip home. This time our purses were bigger, the boys I boxed tougher. But I heaved leather and the referee kept lifting my right hand high.

Even before we hit New York the newspapers were speculating on a Reilly versus Goff match. It was a natural, they said, two kids from the same neighborhood, one an ex-GI, the other bored because of lack of competition.

Mickey said, "Don't pay attention to them sports' writers, Joe. You're still one year away from the top. One year more, one lousy year—" I could see the pleasure in his eyes—"and you'll slap Goff around."

Helen Dorson met us at the station. When Mickey saw her, he gave me a quick look. I hadn't told him I'd wired her. She looked gorgeous, the gold hair under the beret slick and shiny, her blue eyes big and sparkling.

I pulled her into my arms and kissed her hard. She pushed me away, laughed. "Joe," she said. I felt like a kid who'd been caught putting a tack on teacher's chair.

SHE SAID to Mickey, "Hello, Mickey, you're looking good."

"Ain't I," he said.

"You could have written me," she said gently.

He shrugged. "What about?" He looked at her and for a second I thought he'd take her in his arms, like I did, but he didn't.

"Let's go, Joe," he said.

"Mickey," she said, "You are all right, aren't you?"

"Sure." Abruptly he turned. "I gotta see somebody. See you later." In a minute he was gone.

I felt like an actor on a stage who'd lost

his pants. I took her arm. "C'mon, baby, I'll take you home."

"Joe—" there was a cry in her voice—"he hates me. Why, Joe?"

"You're imagining things," I said.

"Oh, but I can see it in his eyes. I don't understand it. Joe, why did he stop writing?"

"You know Mickey. He never was good at writing letters."

I could have told her but I didn't. I took her home and then I took a long walk by myself. I sat on the pier and watched the river rushing for high. After a while I went looking for Mickey. I found him in Dempsey's bar on Eighth Avenue. He was sitting on a stool and I don't know what drink he was working on.

He said, "You following me, Joe?"

I shoved my felt hat back on my head and unbuttoned my coat. "Mickey, I want a fight with Goff."

"Next year."

"No, now."

He forgot his drink for a minute. "When you box Goff I'm gonna be sure you'll beat the living hell out of him. Now he's too good for you."

I said stubbornly, "A year is a long time and I'm not waiting."

Anger brought a red flush to his cheeks. "I'm calling the shots, Joe." Then, gently, "Heck, kid, we can't let that monkey beat the Reillys twice in a row."

I said, "Mickey, if you won't get me the fight, I'll get somebody who will. I've got no contract with you; I'm a free agent. What'll it be, Mickey? Do I fight with you in my corner or Patsy Corrody?"

He studied my face for a while. Then, as if it was too much trouble to argue the point, "If that's what you want, Joe, okay. Now run along, like a good kid. I got some drinking to catch up on."

I said, "Mickey, about Helen."

"Go away. . . . She hates my guts," he said to the whiskey glass. "I could see it in her face."

I said, "Funny, she used the same words about you."

He shook his head. "She knows damn well how I feel."

"How, Mickey," I said, "how does she know? You know what I think, you're both blind as hell."

He stared at me, lips opened. Realization dawned slowly. He got up. "How about you, Joe? You and Helen—"

I said, "I'm gonna be Champ, Mickey and I'm gonna stay Champ for a long time. I don't want women cluttering up the aisle."

WHEN I go out for the fourteenth round my body is one big ache. Even my handlers couldn't put new life into me. Then I look across at Goff and I see he's tired too. I can see it in the way he comes out of his corner, gloves hanging, giving his arms two more seconds of rest. I stick my left in his face and, when he tries to work on my insides, tie him up. I tell him how lousy he is, how he's losing the Championship to me, Joe Reilly. He spits in my face. The referee shakes a finger at him but he laughs, a high, crazy laugh. He plays for my right eye; the left is closed tight. I duck under, put my weight behind a left

hook. He staggers back, surprise etched on his punched-in face. I walk in. This is it, make it or break it. I stab with my left, explode my right. He goes down and I go to a neutral corner. At seven he's up, backing away.

I time it nice and easy. My left feints him out of position, my right comes thundering. He lays on his back, not a muscle moving, as the referee counts ten.

Mickey comes running from our corner and swings my robe around my shoulders. He's all choked up and it's the first time in my life I ever saw tears in my brother's eyes. The cops fill the ring and the photographers grab pictures and I'm singing inside.

After a while we go down the steps. Helen had to fight her way to Mickey's arm. She looks up at him and they grin like kids sharing some secret. Maybe it's because they were married this morning. . . .

THE Army censor in the South American base passed one story that was a knockout; as it turned out—for himself.



MURDER IN FORTALEZA

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